

EDUCATION

an anarchist approach



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autonomy press

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FOREWORD

CHILDREN demand nothing more eagerly than real education. They see it as an integral part of the world they inhabit and take it, as in language or walking, seemingly undeterred by any difficulty. Nobody is teaching them anything, but as long as they are not shut out from the adult world and excluded from adult activities, they learn. Traditionally, for the great mass of the people, this was how the education and socialisation of the young was achieved. Children learnt from doing and observing at first hand. Parents, workmen, the community as a whole were the educators. And, most crucial of all, there was no artificially created gulf between the world of adult and child. Until fairly recent date, formal education divorced from the practical application of community skills, both manual and in the wider sense social and cultural, was the exclusive preserve of princes, priests and ruling elites.

The thrust of industrialism and the new technologies from the steam engine onwards led inevitably to social and economic transformation. Urbanisation grew to grotesque proportions alongside the factory system and the need for mass labour. With the great battalions of the dispossessed penned up in towns in such formidable and potentially dangerous numbers, the demand for stricter ideological conformity became irresistible: the need to straightjacket these hungry and goaded post-revolutionary beasts into a morality of subservience. What was to be filtered down to the poor was the ethos of the new middle classes whose power and influence had risen with their great wealth. It comprised the well-known virtues: Self-hate (sexual), duty (God, money), hard work, sobriety, obedience to masters, subservience to rank, worship of wealth. These were the attributes which would, with time and unremitting application, see one well on one's way towards "getting on", which was, in effect, the repudiation of one's class, a public denunciation of the culpability of that class. To achieve this miracle of social engineering they built schools, somewhat after the prison model, wherein the children of the multitude, for the first time in history, were condemned to be "taught".

It may not have been an entirely original idea. The Catholics had invented the system, mainly for the manufacture of clerics. Over the centuries the Church had perfected it as a powerful instrument of thought control. It was a well-tried and proven formula, if extremely brutal, especially on the minds and bodies of young children. It was to become even more brutal in the hands of the State.

Of course, as with jails and mental hospitals, the regimen in today's schools is no longer openly brutal. The horrors of the day industrial schools and the old reformatory schools, certificated and uncertificated, which sprang up under the aegis of half-a-dozen Education (Scotland) Acts between 1872 and 1908, are no longer common. School techniques and management began to be liberalised as soon as the mass education miracle became assured of success. But fundamentally, the *raison d'être* of the schools has not changed. The essential component in the programme has stayed the same. The inculcation of a socially alien ideology is still what it's all about.

It is revealing that among the millions of oppressed and rejected in society today it is only the young blacks who seem capable of fighting back. Sufficient generations of dupes have not yet rendered them timid and cowed and mute.

To attain an integrated society, as Kropotkin said, you need an "integral education" which would cultivate both manual and mental skills. Education would be taken out of the schools and away from the teachers—for teaching, as we know it, has always been only one thing, instilling an ideology to support a system of exploitation. If it had been anything else, we, "the low, the lost, the last, and the least," would never have smelt it.

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EDUCATION

IT'S A TRICKY subject to deal with, surrounded and permeated as it is with so much bitter class feeling and snobbery. Among left wingers generally it has grown into something of a sacred cow and even some anarchists tend to be at least inconsistent, not to say conservative, in their approach to it. The fact is, however, that very few people give any thought at all to what education really is. Yet on few subjects do people feel so sure of themselves and so certain that no sensible person could harbour anything but conventional opinion. For the most part they take it for granted that they know exactly how and where an education can be got: that they can tell exactly just who has and who has not got it. This unquestioning certainty in so many people should make us highly suspicious from the start. And make no mistake: this is a question of the first importance for anarchists. For as long as we are misled about the true nature of education, the real worth of individual human beings, and the real value of what individual human beings have to contribute, will always be misrepresented, ignored, and forgotten.

At the trial of Socrates it was said that he was a corrupter of the young, that he was placing wrong ideas in their minds. In reply to the charge he explained what his teaching method really amounted to. It's called the maieutic method— from *maieutikos*, Greek for midwifery. It was Socrates' belief that he stood in the same relation to his pupil as the midwife does in relation to the woman in labour. That's to say, his whole concern was bringing forth, drawing into the light of day what is already in the pupil. It is, as you see, the very opposite of hammering in ideas. It's a case of bringing ideas out.

To this day of course even the ultra orthodox educationalists pay lip service to this ideal but in truth Socrates still stands condemned. The bringing forth method is never applied. The hammering in method is all we know.

By education, I do not mean simple instruction. Instruction is one thing: education is quite another. Instruction amounts to no more than the elucidation and explanation of purely mechanical systems—as in grammar, science, or engineering.

But today it is as though the idea of education and the idea of simple instruction have been confounded and made to signify one and the same process. And the basic error of thinking of education as no

more than mechanical instruction leads of course to greater errors. Because if a child proves incapable of absorbing, say, the rules of arithmetic or geometry, by and large he falls into the category of those who are taken to be incapable of profiting by an education. It wouldn't matter at all which category the individual child was assigned to if in fact the lower classification did not breed in him a real sense of inferiority and make it virtually impossible for him ever to seek out genuine education. And so, with his so-called education brought to an abrupt halt in this arbitrary way, he is marched off to the factory where he'll spend the rest of his days, believing himself to be somehow inferior and not 'brainy' like the people who are set in authority over him. Common prejudice is against him. Everyone imagines the case is as plain as ABC. The child's a dunce and that's all there is to it. His status in society is established.

Yet who has the right to say what that child may or may not be capable of? What happens in the classroom, in all sanity, is as unimportant as what happens to the school football team on a Saturday morning. Academic systems are simply games, like chess or snakes and ladders, more or less complicated but in no sense a true gauge of the of the power inherent in any individual. It is of no essential significance and has little or nothing to do with real education. It has nothing to do with real felt knowledge. It has nothing to do with being even moderately wise.

Sooner or later the 'dunce' may acquire a taste for this or that branch of learning, and do well in it. But if he has not been shown that he must look inside himself for the truth; if he has been taught the exact opposite, that he must never simply consult his own feelings and tastes, and make his own personal decisions, no amount of book-work will make him a man.

Because the truth is this: Real knowledge—and by real knowledge I mean knowledge that enhances life, knowledge that enables you as an individual to live as an individual, knowledge that frees you from the cant and prejudices of schoolmasters and any other kind of master—real knowledge cannot be taught in systems like theology or academic philosophy or science or maths or dead languages. Real knowledge is nearer to us than any discipline. Nature doesn't supply us with the complete works of Kant when we're born. She supplies us with blood and brains, and it's in our own blood, in our own heart and brains and soul, that we'll find true knowledge. What is good for us.

Every individual lives within his own personal mystery. Every individual has his own personal slant on things. What comes to you from without is not yours unless you can match it with something you have inside yourself, something of your own. Ultimately only that which is your own is of any real value.

In society today schoolmasters are accepted as being the moral guardians of the young. They are paid, not only to instruct the young in this or that subject, but to bring to bear on the young mind a direct and powerful moral influence. Simple mechanical instruction often blossoms out into political and religious indoctrination. History is mangled and distorted to fit the prejudices of the State System under which we live. Literature is emasculated and dished out piecemeal as milk and water so that young people come to prefer 'Star Wars' and 'Starsky and Hutch'. All this is bad enough. But the real trouble is to be found in the basic conception underlying the educational system. The root cause of all our miseries in this connection is the nature of the relationship fostered between the teacher, the one with the authority of knowledge, and the pupil, the inferior who knows nothing. It is a one sided relationship. It is an authoritarian relationship. The young are forced willy-nilly to accept any so-called teacher the State sees fit to set over them. The young can't attempt to argue with or contradict the teacher. Even at university level to disagree with a tutor is nearly always fatal when the exams come along, if not before.

Such a set-up could never have come into existence, and would not remain in existence one day, without coercion. All the power lies with the teacher—in his right to grade and pigeon-hole children in terms of character as well as mental ability... and in his right to give poor marks in an examination. Poor marks in Garthamlock or Castlemilk, high marks for such places as Bearsden. The latest move by the E.I.S. (Educational Institute of Scotland) to have disruptive children jailed is only in keeping with the real philosophy behind the state educational system.

All this has been going on for so long that people have come to accept it as the only correct way of doing things. Every hateful aspect of our society can be traced back to the authoritarian teacher. The parents were bludgeoned into submission in this way and they take it for granted that wee Johnnie, their son, should be likewise bludgeoned into submission. The authoritarian parent passes Johnnie over to the authoritarian teacher, and the authoritarian teacher makes sure that when wee Johnnie leaves his hands he'll be just as servile and doltish as mum and dad. The vicious circle is complete if wee Johnnie happens to be 'brainy' and ends up as an authoritarian teacher himself.

So what's the solution? It's simple. Don't send the children to school. Ideally that is the anarchist position. But the difficulties of this course are considerable. Being so few in number, the anarchist parents are in a vulnerable position. The question is: would the anguish and anxiety involved for both parent and child in defying the State in this respect be just as gruesome as the results of a successful State education? Personally speaking, I don't think they could be. But here I'm not out to offer anybody a ready-made solution. I wish only to

spread awareness of the wrongs our children must undergo and the lie at the root of what passes as education. If I have done something in that way, my time has not been wasted. Awareness of the wrong must be the first step in putting it right.

There is, of course, one other alternative, which a young comrade, still at school himself, has brought to my notice. His solution: Don't send the teachers to school. It might be worth a try.

(The above essay first appeared in the columns of FREEDOM; the fortnightly journal produced by the London anarchists. In the following issue, Tommy Phelan, lecturer in history and economics at a Scottish college of education, wrote a long letter attacking McLay on various points and suggesting that the real sufferers in state schools were the teachers, forced into authoritarian attitudes by 'culturally deprived ruffians'. McLay's reply is given in full).

nothing to fear

IN HIS CRITICISM of my article on 'Education', Tommy Phelan argues that since each and every one of us is society, we are all therefore responsible for what goes on in society. I wouldn't dispute that we are all part of society but it seems specious to claim from that that we are all responsible for what the State does. The fact is that fewer and fewer people have any responsibility at all for what goes on in society. There is too much coercion to allow of much real responsibility. We inherit a society which is already formed and which is geared to resist change—geared to suppress all action towards personal responsibility in any but a few of its members. It is easy to trot out the old glib cynicism that people only get the kind of government they deserve. Of course this is an irrelevancy in our own day of mass brain-washing and was probably just as unmeaningful in the time of Plato and the iron fist. Nobody 'deserves' anything. Behind the idea of deserving lurks the bogey of the enlightened 'giver', and what can be given can just as easily be taken away. When one's freedom is at stake it is always wise to distrust the giver. And this isn't just another symptom of the anarchist's paranoia—Machiavelli knew it to be true and the ruling classes have seldom made the mistake of neglecting the principle; when A is forced to relinquish power to B, A must very quickly be put out of the way.

Mr. Phelan shows some distaste for the 'culturally deprived' children who force him into authoritarian attitudes. As a teacher he would

prefer not to be an authoritarian. But all authoritarians say the same thing. If only everyone stayed quiet and did as they were told, how nice it would be. I would point out that there are also culturally deprived teachers—and I fear this takes in the bulk of them—men who dish out knowledge in sterile little dogmas for no better reason than that they themselves swallowed the whole lot unquestioningly. They forget that such fare is not to every taste—least of all, perhaps, is it appetising to the sensitive palate of the young.

Fundamentally, Mr. Phelan is really hunting up ammunition with which to defend a moribund system of schooling. Not wishing to attempt the refutation of Socrates (if he had, I'd have welcomed it: goodness knows, Socrates can be debunked), Mr. Phelan claims that the methods of Socrates were all right but that Socrates dealt only with adults. I don't see a great deal of merit in the point, even if it were true. I believe the child has just as much to bring to his own education as the adult. Children always ask more questions, and more difficult questions, than adults. But I would refer Mr. Phelan to the speech of Alcibiades in the Symposium and ask him to remember that at the trial of Socrates the charge was that of corrupting the minds of the young.

Universities, claims Mr. Phelan, do not victimise rebellious students but ignore them. I think students over the past couple of decades might question this. But if Mr. Phelan wants a purely academic instance which he can verify for himself, let him read Stephen Spender's autobiography 'World Within World'. There he'll come across the amusing story of Christopher Isherwood at Oxford. In his final examinations Isherwood answered all the questions in rhymed couplets—he was failed. I could list not a few more personal instances of victimisation of students at various universities, but then Mr. Phelan might accuse me of drawing on my imagination. Of course if one never steps out of line, if one never asserts oneself, if one never questions the crap that is set down before one, one will certainly be ignored.

Mr. Phelan cannot accept that the present-day university is authoritarian in character. This I find strange. What does the university do 90% of the time but preserve traditional values, regardless of the innate worth of these values? And what is the function, I would like to know, of this medieval institution, now that everybody has easy access to books, if it is not to impose outworn attitudes? Does it not hold the young mind in chains, mapping out a course of reading which the pundits have already officially interpreted, lecture the student on the official interpretation, and then test him to see how much he has remembered of what other people think? If that isn't brainwashing I don't know what is. Such a procedure would be laughable if the results were not so tragic: men who will never in their lives again dare to make a decision unless they are first of all certain that the power of the Law and

State is behind them. For the State takes no chances when it comes to creating the facesless ones who will serve it.

Mr. Phelan claims that the anarchists go wrong in thinking that people can be educated into anarchism. Freedom, says Mr. Phelan, is a state of mind and not the end product of a conditioning process.

I am not quite sure what Mr. Phelan means by a 'state of mind'. I like to think of freedom in more clear-cut terms: like having the maximum possible control over one's own life and affairs— the maximum possible control, that is, based on no external or coercive influences, in relation to similarly free human beings.

If Mr. Phelan had read my article a little more closely he would have seen that the crucial point in my argument was that I was against 'educating' people into anything. If Mr. Phelan believes that what passes for education today is nothing other than a conditioning process, then we are in agreement. But it does seem as though he is innocent of any conception of education which would be different from what we have at present.

What Mr. Phelan is really saying is that we think we can brainwash people into anarchism. I can think of no more futile idea. It would be like trying to teach a man to swim by drowning him. But whilst it might be futile to try brainwashing people into freedom, the State certainly knows how to condition people out of it. And that, with respect, is what I think Mr. Phelan and his like are doing. And that is what I am against.

And, furthermore, I do not agree with Mr. Phelan and others who say that anarchism must always be a 'minority creed'. In the first place, in no strict sense is it a creed. What have creeds and binding ideologies to do with anarchism? Is sensible husbandry a creed or the practical management of one's own affairs? Did the man who shaped the first wheel owe his inspiration to an ideology? Like that man, the anarchist has discerned a natural and very practical way to eliminate the evils which abound in society today. I do not believe that the entrenched power of the masters, who promote and live off these evils, can succeed forever in keeping the masses blind to so natural a remedy. Anarchism is practical action and I do not believe the mind of man will ever rest easy too far away from what is practical.

I said at the outset that education was a tricky subject to deal with encompassed as it is with so much bitter class feeling, snobbery and simple-minded prejudice. I think I have been proved right. For in the rather confused arguments of Tommy Phelan all these are patently obvious. I would say to Tommy Phelan: Please read my article again, a little more closely this time, and do make an effort to be a bit more objective. You take me to task for using my imagination. In my exper-

ience a little imagination often yields surer insights than an abundance of identification. Lay your schoolmaster's dogmatism aside for a moment. You have little to fear, if you only knew it.

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